

Equivocal feminists

*The Social Democratic Federation and the
woman question 1884–1911*

Karen Hunt



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Hunt, Karen.

Equivocal feminists: the Social Democratic Federation and the
woman question, 1884-1911 / Karen Hunt.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 55451 9 (hardcover)

1. Women and socialism - Great Britain - History. 2. Women
socialists - Great Britain - History. 3. Feminism - Great Britain -
History. 4. Women in politics - Great Britain - History. 5. Social
Democratic Federation - History. I. Title.

HQ1597.H85 1996

305.42'0941 - dc20 95-22984 CIP

ISBN 0 521 55451 9 hardback

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page xii</i>
Introduction	1
The stereotype of the SDF	7
Part 1 The woman question: the theory	21
1 The contribution of the founding fathers	23
The reception of ' <i>The Origin of the Family</i> ' and ' <i>Woman and Socialism</i> ' in the British socialist movement	29
2 The SDF's understanding of the woman question	37
The sex/class analogy	42
Woman's oppression as a sex	46
Sexual equality	48
Nature or nurture?	50
Feminism	51
Strategic implications of the woman question	53
3 Understanding the SDF and the woman question	57
The paradoxical Mr Bax	57
Clara Zetkin, the International and internationalism	63
A comparative case: race	70
Part 2 The SDF and the woman question: the theory and practice of the party on aspects of the woman question	79
4 The politics of the private sphere	81
Socialism and the family	81
Marriage and 'free love'	86
The Lanchester Case	94
Beyond the Lanchester Case: the SDF's response to 'free love' as a public issue	105
The Bedborough Case	106
The Potteries and 'free love'	109
Wells and the Fabian Basis	111

The politics of the private sphere: the SDF, family, marriage and 'free love'	115
5 Women and work	118
Women's work as an issue for the SDF	118
Protective legislation	124
Equal pay	128
Wages boards and minimum wage legislation	130
Trade unions	132
The endowment of motherhood: an alternative means to economic independence	137
Women and unemployment: a woman's right to work	142
6 The suffrage	152
The years before the militants (1884–1905)	153
The polarisation of positions: limited women's suffrage versus adult suffrage (1905–1907)	159
Adult suffrage as a socialist demand (1907–1911)	170
The suffrage and the woman question	182
 Part 3 Women and the SDF: the practical implications of the SDF's understanding of the woman question	 185
7 The SDF's attitude to women as potential socialists	187
Women as a problem for socialism	187
Socialism as a problem for women: barriers to participation	191
The SDF's understanding of women's politicisation	197
8 Women SDFers and their role in the party	204
9 The organisation of women within the SDF	217
Women's right to self-organisation: the debate	217
SDF women's organisation before 1904	220
Rochdale women's section	221
The Women's Socialist Circles (1904–11)	226
The development of the Circles	229
The function of the Circles	231
The organisational relationship between the Circles and the party	235
Northampton Women's Circle	241
The practical implications of the SDF's understanding of the woman question	247
 Conclusion	 251
 <i>Appendices</i>	
A comparison between women on the Executives of the SDF and the ILP	259
A comparison between women delegates at SDF and ILP Annual Conferences	260

Contents	xi
A graph of the number of local Women's Socialist Circles, 1904–11	261
SDP Women's Education Committee syllabus of subjects for discussion, 1910–11	262
Short biographies of key figures	265
<i>Bibliography</i>	274
<i>Index</i>	289

Introduction

The woman question has always haunted socialist politics. Today, the policy of women-only shortlists unsettles many Labour Party members. At the same time, many women are concerned by the apparently unbridgeable gap between socialist rhetoric on sexual equality and the priority given to women's issues in practice. It was ever thus. Certainly the woman question was a contentious issue in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What was 'the woman question'? It embraced all aspects of the relations between the sexes in the public sphere – including work and politics – and those in the private sphere – including the family, marriage and sexuality. The woman question was also where the concepts of 'the public' and 'the private' were analysed. But as a contentious issue which concerned the nature of women's oppression, the woman question encompassed a range of perspectives. This book is concerned with the ways in which a particular group of socialists – the Social Democratic Federation – understood 'woman' in its theory and through its practice.

For socialists the woman question was often reduced to the phrase 'sex versus class'. Their purpose was to identify what constituted the defining feature of an individual woman's identity and hence her collective loyalty. The crucial question was where should working-class women put their hopes and commitment – with their class and therefore to socialism, or with their sex and therefore to feminism. Or was some kind of socialist feminism or feminist socialism possible? I explore these issues in a specific historical context, namely the socialism of the Second International (1889–1914) – the internationalist umbrella organisation which brought together representatives of national socialist parties and labour organisations from across the world, particularly Europe and the United States. The focus of this study is Britain's first marxist party, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), described by Eric Hobsbawm as 'the first modern socialist organisation of national

importance in Britain'.¹ Formed in 1884, the SDF lasted, with a minor change of name, until 1911 after which it became the most significant component of the British Socialist Party (BSP).²

Originally I was drawn to this project by a desire to explore the relationship between socialism and feminism. Some might see this as an old-fashioned issue, embedded in a 'modernist' feminism untouched by the claims of post-structuralism or the critiques of black and lesbian feminists.³ The focus and, indeed, the language of feminism may have changed: but the way in which socialism understands 'woman' continues to have implications for the politics of many women.

Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips recently contrasted the feminism of the 1970s with that of today. They argue that the former took the notion of 'women's oppression' to be unproblematic and searched for causes and answers at the level of social structure. Consequently the late 1970s and early 1980s saw attempts to 'dissolve the hyphen' in socialist-feminism in the search for a plausible means of cementing the two analyses of class society and of patriarchy.⁴ For example, Heidi Hartmann's 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism' prompted much discussion which focused particularly on the inadequacies of Marxism.⁵ This theoretical debate was never successfully resolved and it could be argued that feminist debate moved on 'from grand theory to local studies'.⁶ But does this mean that in the 1990s there is no longer a need to consider the relationship between socialism and feminism, that the sex versus class debate is over – somehow dissolved or simply irrelevant?

I would argue that this debate remains relevant precisely because it is unresolved. And we can return to it with the lessons learnt from the 1980s,⁷

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Hyndman and the SDF', in *Labouring Men*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, p. 231.

² The SDF was renamed the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1907 but as this did not indicate any change in the party's politics or practice I will use SDF as the general term to describe the party up to 1911, except when there is a specific reference to the SDP.

³ Introduction to M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds.), *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Polity, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 1–9. See also L. C. Johnson, 'Socialist Feminisms', in S. Gunew (ed.), *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, Routledge, 1990, pp. 304–31.

⁴ Z. R. Eisenstein (ed.), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979, including R. Petchesky, 'Dissolving the Hyphen', pp. 373–89.

⁵ L. Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, Pluto, 1981.

⁶ Introduction to M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds.), *Destabilizing Theory*, p. 6.

⁷ The debate on sex and class did not disappear in the 1980s: examples are J. L. Newton, M. P. Ryan and J. R. Walkowitz (eds.), *Sex and Class in Women's History*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983; A. Phillips, *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class*, Virago, 1987. But a significant challenge was posed by acknowledging and

as much from women's politics as from disputes within the academy. There are still socialists who argue for the pre-eminence of class,⁸ but there are fewer feminists who would argue for such a crude dichotomy. Class, we now habitually agree, is clearly one of the differences between women – but so are, for example, race, sexuality and age. Class itself has little meaning unless the process whereby it is gendered is continually explored. For feminists, at least, it is no longer 'sex versus class', as the ways in which we understand one term are framed by our understanding of the other. Yet historically the polarity of 'sex versus class' has structured so much of the relationship between socialism and feminism. These political movements have constructed historically specific meanings for the categories crucial to their ideologies and patterned them in relation to each other. These meanings inform our present understanding of 'socialism', 'feminism' and the relationship between them.

Although it may seem that the earlier debates on the nature of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy were intensely theoretical, they were prompted by very real concerns about the practical relationship between the politics of feminism and of socialism. In Britain these concerns included not only the conduct of Women's Liberation Conferences, specific campaigns and local women's groups but also the choices and compromises that individual women made on where to put their political energies. Emblematic of that debate and the tensions between socialism and feminism – including the ramifications for practical politics – was *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*,⁹ particularly Sheila Rowbotham's contribution. This drew as much on the exploration of historical antecedents as on contemporary anxieties about the 'macho' tendencies of the Left. Rowbotham's approach is part of a tradition within the Left of exploring contemporary questions and dilemmas with reference to the past which the British women's movement has also shared. My study has grown out of this tradition.

My subject matter – the SDF – is traditionally seen as the province of labour history but my approach is derived from feminist history. This is because British labour historians have been reluctant to integrate gender

dealing with differences between women, especially race and sexuality. See, for example, K. K. Bhavnani and M. Coulson, 'Transforming Socialist-Feminism: The Challenge of Racism', *Feminist Review*, 23, 1986, pp. 81–92. For one account of the interaction of these debates with practical politics, see K. Harriss, 'New Alliances: Socialist Feminism in the Eighties', *Feminist Review*, 31, 1989, pp. 34–54.

⁸ See, for example, L. German, *Sex, Class and Socialism*, Bookmarks, 1994.

⁹ S. Rowbotham, L. Segal and H. Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, Newcastle Socialist Centre and Islington Community Press, 1979.

into their practices and concerns in any systematic fashion.¹⁰ Women scholars are doing some of this work but their concerns, insights and questions remain marginal to much of what passes for labour history today.¹¹ It is not just a question of placing women, in all their diversity, back into the accounts of working-class life and politics. A new labour history has to analyse the ways in which the questions and concepts used within labour history are themselves structured by assumptions about gender. What I sought to understand in this work was the ways in which socialists had come to understand the category 'woman' at that moment when there was for the first time an organised women's movement and a socialist movement. Did it have to be sex *versus* class, and what was meant by these terms? Were women socialists always perceived as different from socialists? These questions form part of a feminist re-evaluation of socialism. Socialism and feminism have affected one another's evolution, in both a pro-active and a re-active manner, and their conceptual developments are tangled together. It is only by tracing the complex conceptual and historical roots of socialism that we can begin to examine the way that this ideology has understood women's experience.

Such a feminist re-evaluation of socialism can learn from the equivalent reconsideration of organised feminism. Despite the growth of women's history, there has only recently been a considered exploration of 'first wave' feminism. This has sought to untangle the meaning of 'feminism' or 'feminisms' from the diversity of campaigns, politics and personalities which made up the women's movement. This project is

¹⁰ In comparison, see recent discussions of American and German labour history: A. Baron, 'Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future', in A. Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991, pp. 1–46; A. Baron, 'On Looking at Men: Masculinity and the Making of a Gendered Working Class History', in A. L. Shapiro (ed.), *Feminists Revision History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1994, pp. 146–71; *Labor History*, 34, 2–3, 1993, essays by L. Fink (pp. 178–89) and A. Kessler-Harris (pp. 190–204); K. Canning, 'Gender and the Politics of Class Formation: Rethinking German Labor History', *American Historical Review*, 97, 3, 1992, pp. 736–68.

¹¹ See, for example, the marginality of gender in the debate about 'class' and the linguistic turn prompted by P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. See in addition to Joyce, J. Belchem, 'A Language of Classlessness', *Labour History Review*, 57, 2, 1992, pp. 43–5. Also see the debate in *Social History* with contributions from D. Mayfield and S. Thorne (17, 1992, pp. 165–88), J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (18, 1993, pp. 1–5), P. Joyce (18, 1993, pp. 81–5), J. Vernon (19, 1994, pp. 221–40), and N. Kirk (19, 1994, pp. 221–40). Although feminist texts are cited in contributions to this debate, particularly Joan Scott's, the issues raised by her and others in seeking to engender 'class' are, if recognised at all, thrown to the margins – peripheral to the central noisy combat.

influenced by sensitivities derived from the varied experience of the current women's movement. The focus is less on labelling past women as 'socialist feminist' or 'liberal feminist' – as earlier accounts of the development of the women's movement did¹² – and more on exploring the diversity, conflicts and shared assumptions between and within individual feminists. Susan Kingsley Kent has drawn a picture of a late Victorian and Edwardian feminism which, while centring on the suffrage, contextualised that demand within a much broader feminist critique.¹³ Barbara Caine and Phillipa Levine have shown the complexity of Victorian feminism in its relationship to party politics, the interweaving of single issue campaigns into a women's movement and how this was played out in the lives of individual women.¹⁴

British socialist women have been relatively neglected in this revisionist history, a welcome exception being June Hannam's work on the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and on Isabella Ford.¹⁵ There is a range of biographical studies of individual British socialist women from Eleanor Marx to Selina Cooper by way of Margaret McMillan.¹⁶ All are more than narrowly focused biographies and in their different ways address aspects of the political context encountered by their subjects, as well as what it meant for these individuals to be both women and socialists. Organisationally, there have also been some studies of the Women's Labour League. These include the descriptive account given by Christine Collette as well as more specific articles by Caroline Rowan and by Pat Thane which consider the links between Labour women and welfare issues into the interwar period.¹⁷ This work enables some

¹² For example, O. Banks, *Faces of Feminism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1981.

¹³ S. K. Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914*, Routledge, 1990.

¹⁴ B. Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992; P. Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850–1900*, Hutchinson, 1987; P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990.

¹⁵ J. Hannam, '“In the Comradeship of the Sexes Lies the Hope of Progress and Social Regeneration”: Women in the West Riding ILP, c. 1890–1914', in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or Different: Women's Politics, 1800–1914*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1987; J. Hannam, *Isabella Ford*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989; J. Hannam, 'Women and the ILP, 1890–1914' in D. James, T. Jowitt and K. Laybourn (eds.), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party*, Ryburn, Halifax, 1992.

¹⁶ Y. Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 2 vols, Lawrence and Wishart, 1972 & 1976; J. Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selina Cooper*, Virago, 1984; C. Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan 1860–1931*, Virago, 1990.

¹⁷ C. Collette, *For Labour and for Women: The Women's Labour League, 1906–18*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989; C. Rowan, '“Mothers Vote Labour!” The State, the Labour Movement and Working-Class Mothers, 1900–18', in R. Brunt and C. Rowan (eds.), *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1982; P. Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906–45' in H. L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1990; P. Thane, 'Visions of Gender in the Making of the British Welfare State: The Case of Women in the British Labour Party and Social Policy, 1906–45', in G. Bock

comparisons to be drawn with the practice of women in the SDF but more directly useful to the broader questions I want to raise is Eleanor Gordon's work on women and the labour movement in Scotland which includes a chapter on women and working-class politics.¹⁸ Together these works contribute pieces of an incomplete jigsaw but there is nothing that explores women's relationship to British socialism in its entirety in the way that Barbara Taylor's *Eve and the New Jerusalem* did for the earlier Owenite version of socialism.¹⁹ *Equivocal Feminists* lays the ground for such a study by considering one organisation and, more importantly, the particular construction of the woman question which underlay the practice of Second International socialism in Britain.

My discussion is premised on the need to relate theory to practice, and practice to theory. It is the inter-relationship of these traditionally separate areas which constituted the socialist understanding of the woman question. I therefore analyse the theoretical underpinning of the woman question and its place within the SDF's understanding of socialism. I do this not only through an assessment of the party's, and particularly, individual members' perception of the question as a whole, but also through a closer study of the theory and practice concerning particular aspects, such as marriage and 'free love'. To understand the impact of the party's construction of the woman question on the lives of existing and potential female SDFers,²⁰ I explore the ways in which the question affected the party's assessment of women's potential for politicisation, and their actual organisation within the party. In this way the interplay between socialism and feminism is explored in a specific historical context and in relation to practical outcomes.

I am interested in establishing a history for women within the SDF. But this is not just an archaeology of SDF women – who they were and what they did. It is also important to consider whether one can generalise about 'SDF women', or whether theirs were such diverse experiences that little generalisation is possible. I am equally concerned to understand the strategies and choices women adopted individually and

and P. Thane (eds.), *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of European Welfare States 1880s–1950s*, Routledge, 1991; P. Thane, 'Women in the British Labour Party and the Construction of State Welfare, 1906–39', in S. Koven and S. Michel (eds.), *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Policies and the Origins of Welfare States*, Routledge, 1993.

¹⁸ E. Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850–1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, esp. ch. 7.

¹⁹ B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*, Virago, 1983.

²⁰ It has become a convention among historians to call members of the SDF, 'SDFers', although they themselves tended to use the term 'Social Democrat' for the same purpose.

collectively in a mixed-sex political party. This is a feminist history of a political organisation which, unlike traditional histories of the British labour movement, self-consciously foregrounds gender.

To do this requires us to move beyond the stereotype of the SDF which has shaped its representation by many historians. Secondary sources are often unreliable. In order to understand my argument regarding the SDF's theory and practice, we must consider the origin and nature of this stereotype.

The stereotype of the SDF

In 1967 Paul Thompson argued that 'a misleading picture has been painted of the Social Democrats as a bitter, dogmatic and impractical sect inherently unsuitable to English politics'.²¹ Yet this stereotype of the SDF has been remarkably tenacious. Two groups have contributed to this, contemporaries and historians. Contemporaries of the SDF – particularly members of the ILP – made judgements coloured by political rivalry. These have been used as 'objective' evidence by historians. This can be illustrated by one of the most cited judgements of the SDF made by an ILPer, who said:

there is no disguising that the ways of the SDF are not our ways. If I may say so, the ways of the SDF are more doctrinaire, more Calvinistic, more aggressively sectarian than the ILP. The SDF has failed to touch the heart of the people. Its strange disregard of the religious, moral and aesthetic sentiments of the people is an overwhelming defect.²²

The context of this remark is rarely given, yet it is crucial: this was not a considered judgement by an observer but part of an inter-party polemic. John Bruce Glasier,²³ the author, was a leading opponent of the SDF and was on this occasion attempting to persuade his own party's rank and file from fusing with the SDF to form a united socialist party. His purpose was therefore to emphasise difference, even at the expense of truth.²⁴ A stereotype of the SDF as sectarian and alien to British political

²¹ P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885–1914*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, p. 297. See also D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888–1906*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1983, who describes the stereotype of the SDF as 'tendentious, partial and misleading' (p. 389).

²² *Labour Leader*, 14 April 1898.

²³ For Glasier, see L. Thompson, *The Enthusiasts*, Gollancz, 1971.

²⁴ For the implications of, and context to, the socialist unity debate of 1896–7, particularly the ways in which the ILP leadership 'managed' the debate by emphasising differences with the SDF, see D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party*, pp. 314–6, 393–4.

culture was of value to the SDF's opponents. Yet this image has too often been taken up uncritically by historians.

Before examining the degree to which this stereotype was anchored in the reality of the SDF, we must pause to consider what exactly is understood by the term 'SDF'. The answer might appear obvious – the party, consisting of the entire membership. Yet in many accounts, the organisation is reduced to its leadership and particularly to H. M. Hyndman, its leader. This tendency has been exacerbated by the only major work dealing solely with the SDF, Tsuzuki's *H. M. Hyndman and British Socialism*,²⁵ written over thirty years ago. It is essentially Hyndman's biography and not an analytical history of the party. Tsuzuki's verdict was that 'the SDF always bore the imprint of Hyndman's personality, and its weekly organ, *Justice*, spoke constantly with his voice – bitter, tactless and narrow minded in its support of "the Cause", but also (as H. G. Wells said of Hyndman) possessed of a "magnificent obstinacy"'.²⁶ Yet the SDF *was* much more than one man. Nevertheless, his idiosyncracies – which included anti-semitism and jingoism – have been substituted, in many cases, for a more considered study of a party which was more diverse than any stereotype will allow. The personal views of one top-hatted, frock-coated stock-broker are taken to represent a party where he was the exception, not the rule.²⁷

The SDF's membership was largely working class, organised in branches scattered across the country. Its strongholds were Lancashire, particularly Burnley, and Northampton, as well as London. Obviously the geographical problems of organising a tightly disciplined party would have been enormous, but then that was never the SDF's intention. The SDF was never a mass party, although it aspired in the long term to widespread popular support. It was in effect a vanguard, a trustee for socialist theory in a hostile environment. As the official history of the party noted, the SDF 'has been the Socialist conscience of the Labour Movement, the Movement's mentor, the guardian of the sacred fire'.²⁸ The SDF saw itself as a vanguard and on that basis distinguished itself from the ILP. As one SDFer asked:

Should we mix in with this slow moving crowd, trudging along, abating our pace, in order to keep company with the rest, stopping and halting wherever they

²⁵ C. Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman and British Socialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

²⁷ See, for example, G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History*, Croom Helm, 1985, p. 21; R. Moore, *The Emergence of the Labour Party, 1880–1924*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1978, p. 35.

²⁸ H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social Democracy in Britain*, SDF, 1935, p. 13.

choose? Or should we rather dash forward, place ourselves in front and explain to the crowd the meaning and significance of the road, the aim of the journey, and in general act as guides. The first means being led by elemental forces, the second means leading and guiding them. The ILP adopted the first, we of the SDF the second.²⁹

But, vanguard or not, the party gave considerable autonomy to its branches, and their practices also belie the stereotype.³⁰ The SDF was at least the sum of its parts: not merely the London-dominated Executive, the London-based leadership or even Hyndman himself.

The major element in the stereotype of the SDF is the accusation of sectarianism. This was made by contemporaries³¹ and has been amplified by subsequent historians. It is usually associated with other pejoratives such as bitterness, aridity, rigidity and dogmatism.³² But was the SDF a 'sect'? The party was certainly not large, numbering 2–3,000 at any one time, with quite a high turnover of membership.³³ Indeed the German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein estimated that the SDF had had over 100,000 temporary recruits. Walter Kendall believes even this to be an underestimate while Hyndman suggested in 1896 that a million men (*sic*) had already been members of the party.³⁴ What is clear is that the numbers of people who had for a time been SDFers ensured that the party had a much more significant influence in the labour movement than its actual membership at any one time might indicate. Keith Burgess asserts that the SDF 'influenced the thinking of an entire generation of working-class leaders', while Laurence Thompson wrote

²⁹ *Social Democrat*, October 1907, pp. 607–8.

³⁰ C. Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman*, p. 274; E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Hyndman and the SDF', p. 235. This is born out in the few local studies of the SDF which have been conducted, for example, on London by P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour*, on Reading in S. Yeo, *Religion and Voluntary Organisations in Crisis*, Croom Helm, 1976; and on Burnley in K. Hunt, 'An Examination of the Burnley Social Democratic Federation, 1891–1914', MA dissertation, Manchester University, 1979.

³¹ For example, G. B. Shaw, *The Fabian Society: Its Early History*, Fabian Tract, 41, 1892, p. 21.

³² For example, K. Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour*, Croom Helm, 1980, p. 102; S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, Pluto, 1974, p. 77; S. Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism: The Struggle for a New Consciousness*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1973, p. 273; E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Hyndman and the SDF', p. 232; H. Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party, 1880–1900*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 173; G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought*, p. 27. Even Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party describes the SDF as 'sectarian'! (*Class Struggle and Women's Liberation*, Bookmarks, 1984, p. 110).

³³ For membership figures of the SDF, see P. A. Watnough, 'The Membership of the Social Democratic Federation, 1885–1902', *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin*, 34, 1977, pp. 35–40.

³⁴ W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–21: The Origins of British Communism*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, pp. 322–3.

of the SDF that there was 'scarcely a pioneer of British Socialism who did not pass through it or owe some debt to it'.³⁵

The party defined itself in terms of socialist orthodoxy and was opposed to labourism. As Hyndman wrote, 'It was the principles that counted, not the numbers that embraced them'.³⁶ This is certainly the basis of a sect, but that does not necessarily imply sectarianism. Indeed SDFers, such as Theodore Rothstein writing in 1900, were concerned that the SDF might be a sect and sought to explain this and explore means to overcome it. He felt that the SDF had been 'more of a sect than a party' because it had been born before its time. Rothstein argued against self-conscious isolation and for the kind of political practice which could put a mass socialist party on the agenda. He wrote:

The very principle of class war which formerly served as a cloud that hid our august personality from the eyes of the world and kept us high above it, ought to become the unbreakable chain that keeps us in constant touch with all parts of society. Only it must be understood as applicable to *all* social phenomena, to *every* movement, however inaccessible to a strictly economic interpretation.³⁷

Clearly for Rothstein the party's practice was crucial. Local activity by SDFers in organising the unemployed, fighting for school meals and working in trade unions meant, as Henry Collins has observed, 'that the party never became just another sect'. Collins continues, 'But if the SDF was not *just* a sect it was *partly* a sect and the reason for that is linked closely with its disbelief in the possibility of effective industrial action'.³⁸ The SDF's attitude to trade unionism has been seen as emblematic of the SDF's sectarianism.

To understand the party's position on trade unionism, its whole political strategy needs to be elaborated. For the SDF political action centred on its programme of 'stepping stones to a happier period'. These included public provision of low cost housing, free compulsory education with free school meals, the eight-hour day, progressive income tax, and nationalisation of the railways, the banks and the land.³⁹ The party chose to use the parliamentary and local government electoral system as a platform for its programme and more general socialist propaganda. Its belief that more capital could be gained from organising campaigns around demands on the state, such as the Right to Work campaign and that for Free Maintenance, was reinforced by early

³⁵ K. Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour*, p. 61; L. Thompson, *The Enthusiasts*, p. 34.

³⁶ H. M. Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences*, Macmillan, 1912, p. 2.

³⁷ *Social Democrat*, June 1900, p. 169.

³⁸ H. Collins, 'The Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923*, Macmillan, 1971, p. 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

scepticism of the organised labour movement of the 1880s and, in particular, of its leadership.⁴⁰ The SDF viewed the unions of this period as representative of only a fraction of the working class. More importantly, in its early years the party felt that 'trade unions as they now are' could not hope to participate in the victorious outcome of the class struggle.⁴¹ This initial suspicion of the trade unions led to some contemporaries and many historians assuming that the SDF was completely antipathetic to industrial action; the later rejection of Syndicalism seemed to confirm this.⁴²

Yet the SDF was not insensitive to the value of trade unions. During the Socialist Unity debate of the late 1890s, the ILP explicitly criticised the SDF: 'We have differed from the SDF almost solely because we have refused to adopt certain rigid propagandist phrases and to cut ourselves off from other sections of the Labour movement, particularly trade-unionism and co-operation, and the advanced elements in the humanitarian movements'. In reply, it was argued for the SDF, 'If one comes to the actual facts I think it will be found that the SDF has as large a proportion of active trade unionists in its ranks as any organisation in the kingdom, and I do not think we should suffer at all by comparison with the ILP in this respect'.⁴³ Certainly the SDF increasingly felt that it was being misrepresented as anti-trade union. At the SDF's Annual Conference in 1897, party members were urged to join trade unions.⁴⁴ Why then do historians continue to present the SDF as anti-union?⁴⁵ The kind of political practice in which SDF members engaged and through which they sought to win recruits to the party was admittedly diverse. Yet it certainly included participation in unions and in strikes. In 1898 *Justice* cited a long list of party members who were active in their trade unions – this included many of the party's leading figures. Local studies of the SDF show the extent of unionisation and militancy amongst rank and file SDFers.⁴⁶ But what the party could not accept was that industrial activity had primacy: that it alone formed the basis of socialist strategy. For the SDF, the unions formed but one arena for socialist propaganda. This did not amount to a thorough hostility to the

⁴⁰ For the SDF's attitude to trade unions, see *ibid.*, pp. 53–6; C. Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman*, pp. 87–106. In contrast, M. Bevir has recently suggested that the SDF objected to the apolitical nature of British trade unions ('The British Social Democratic Federation: From O'Brienism to Marxism', *International Review of Social History*, 37, 1992, p. 228).

⁴¹ 'The SDF Manifesto to Trade Unions', in *Justice*, 6 September 1884.

⁴² B. Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900–14*, Pluto, 1976, pp. 179–80.

⁴³ *Labour Leader*, 14 April 1898; *Justice*, 23 April 1898.

⁴⁴ *Justice*, 7 August 1897; *SDF Conference Report*, 1897, pp. 21–2.

⁴⁵ K. Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ *Justice*, 23 April 1898; K. Hunt, 'Burnley Social Democratic Federation', pp. 83–104.

ethos of the British labour movement. Nor was it evidence of either dogmatism or sectarianism.

Some historians see the SDF's position on trade unionism as a function of a dogmatic Marxism.⁴⁷ Even Engels criticised the early SDF – which he had sought to influence – because it ‘managed to transform our theory into the rigid dogma of an orthodox sect’.⁴⁸ Yet the SDF's Marxism was not very different from that of its sister organisations in the Second International – theirs was also an orthodox, economistic Marxism. If criticism of the SDF was particularly sharp, perhaps this was because more was expected from the British version of Marxism. The presence of Marx and Engels in Britain contributed to this perception, but so too did the advanced development of the British labour movement, specifically the trade unions. The SDF's alternative socialist strategy, which focused on the unemployed, rather than on pre-existing labour organisations and radical Liberal sympathies, fitted awkwardly with such expectations. Not surprisingly, those historians sympathetic to the socialist project see a real failure of imagination in the SDF. Eric Hobsbawm wrote that the SDF's ‘tradition was not so much revolutionary as intransigent: militant, firmly based on the class struggle, but quite unable to envisage ... the problems of revolt or the taking of power, for which there was no precedent within living memory in Britain’. Sheila Rowbotham concluded her assessment of the SDF equally disappointed, ‘Tragically, revolutionary ideas and politics were poisoned at source in Britain’.⁴⁹ Certainly the SDF's was a ‘narrow and unimaginative interpretation of Marxism’⁵⁰ – but then so was that of most of its contemporaries. Historians who see in the SDF a ‘complete lack of political wisdom’ and an ability ‘on almost every issue ... to hit upon a consistent but unpractical stand’⁵¹ must produce more evidence of the party's alleged dogmatism. The contrast with the

⁴⁷ W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain*, p. 11; R. Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism*, Croom Helm, 1978, p. 12; H. Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, p. 217; G. D. H. Cole, *History of Socialist Thought*, vol. 2: *Marxism and Anarchism, 1850–1890*, Macmillan, 1954, p. 410.

⁴⁸ H. Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party*, p. 20; C. Tsuzuki, *H. M. Hyndman*, pp. 59–62; Engels to Sorge, 10 November 1894 quoted in H. Collins ‘The Marxism of the SDF’, p. 48. See also Engels to Sorge, 12 May 1894, quoted in W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain*, pp. 11–12.

⁴⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm, ‘Hyndman and the SDF’, p. 236; S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, p. 95. See also J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867–1974*, Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1983, pp. 51–2.

⁵⁰ H. Collins, ‘The Marxism of the SDF’, p. 48. See also S. Pierson, *British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1979, pp. 26–30.

⁵¹ J. H. S. Reid, *The Origins of the British Labour Party*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1955, p. 51.